

# Three Fundamental Components of the Autopoiesic Leadership Model

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## Abstract:

**Research Question (RQ):** What type of leadership could be developed upon transformational leadership?

**Purpose:** The purpose of the research was to create a new leadership style. Its variables can be further developed upon transformational leadership variables. Namely, this leadership style is known as a successful leadership style in successful organisations.

**Method:** In the research of published papers from scientific databases, we relied on the triangulation of theories. To clarify the research question, we have researched different authors, who based their research papers on different hypotheses. In some articles, hypotheses were even contradictory.

**Results:** Through the research, we have concluded that authors often changed certain variables when researching the topic of transformational leadership. We have correlated these variables and developed a new model, naming it autopoiesic leadership. Its main variables are (1) goal orientation, (2) emotional sensitivity, and (3) manager's flexibility in organisations.

**Organisation:** Our research can have a positive effect on managers in terms of recognising the importance of selected variables. Practical application of autopoiesic leadership can imply more efficiency in business processes of a company, increasing its financial performance.

**Society:** Autopoiesic leadership is a leadership style that largely influences the use of the individual's internal resources. Thus, she or he becomes internally motivated, and this is the basis for quality work. This strengthens employees' social aspect which consequently also has a positive effect on their life outside the organisational system, i.e. their family and broader living environment.

**Originality:** In the worldwide literature, we have noticed the concept autopoiesis in papers about management subjects, but the autopoiesic leadership model has not been developed so far.

**Limitations / Future Research:** We based our research on the triangulation of theories, which has been limited to three key variables. We could understand this as a limitation of the research. We will continue the research in the future and try to complement or proceed with a further development of the autopoiesic leadership model.

**Key words:** transformational leadership, autopoiesic leadership, goal orientation, emotional sensitivity, flexibility.

## 1 Introduction

The market is constantly changing and competition is becoming harsher and harsher. Some enterprises strive to reach the best positions on the market, while others struggle only to survive. It is becoming increasingly obvious that they cannot succeed only because of the product or service they offer. Of course, it is the fundamental function of operation, and definitely, it is still essential; yet, there is also an added value that includes other aspects. Predominantly, the added value is company culture, which, in the first place, implies management culture, and then corporate cooperation (Keller and Richey 2017, pp. 47–58). The success of an enterprise will increasingly depend on “who” and “what” it is on the

market. This is what identity of an enterprise is based on today. In the past, an enterprise's identity was based exclusively on what it was doing or creating; but today, this is not the case anymore, rather: it is important, how much an enterprise is culturally developed, as well as how and, in the first place, in what way it cooperates with the environment.

Company culture is comprised of all employees, but the first among equals are the management personnel. That is the key element on which it depends how much enterprise culture will be encouraged to develop in the direction according to the wishes of the enterprise. Of course, it is also comprised of activities with long-term results. Organisational culture is one of the slowest changing variables; in addition, finally, yet importantly, it is largely affected by the environment in which an enterprise operates. However, raising organisational culture can also raise effectiveness of an enterprise (Arditi, Nayak & Damci 2017, pp. 136–147).

The process of accepting something new (i.e., a learning process) always leads to creativity and innovation. It is a significance of thinking environments where successful enterprises operate nowadays.

All of the above-mentioned is only a stepping-stone for enterprises looking into the future with their visions. They are aware of the importance of intuitiveness. Simply put, there is no more time for the management to analyse all potential ways and consequent results before making decisions. Nowadays, it is more important making quick decisions than taking enough time to develop them. We must rely on our intuition. It is the variable, which will be common to all successful managers in informed environments. Yet, it includes the self as well – an extended ego expanding into the unconscious. Indeed, good decisions are hidden in us; we only need to rely on them.

The purpose of our research is to find important components of autopoiesic leadership. Such leadership could be successful in enterprises that operate in informed environments, and where essential elements would be intuitiveness and the self.

## **2 Theoretical background**

All characteristics of successful enterprises and their managers are in line with the concept of autopoiesis: self-renovation and self-development. It is what successful enterprises nowadays strive for, as they are aware of its advantage in the future. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela designed holistic Santiago theory (Santiago Theory of Cognition) that was focused on the coincidence of cognitive process, that is, on the learning process together with the process of life (Maturana & Varela 1980, pp. 78–79). The key message of this theory is that a live system reacts to the impacts from the environment; these impacts transformed already known samples through structural changes, and establish their own. In this situation, the ones who freely decide about how much they will allow to be affected by an environment, and to which extent they will influence the environment in the future, are alone. Furthermore, all this can be the result only of high emotional intelligence. Scientific studies have indicated for some time

now that emotional intelligence is of utmost importance for successful leadership. We found the explanation of concepts *autopoiesis* and *autopoietic*, described by Peček Balažic and Bukovec in their article (2017, 50), very valuable. In their paper, they suggest the use of terms *autopoiesis* or *autopoiesic*, since the reader can associate the term autopoietic with the art of literature.

When searching for the concept of autopoiesis in the literature, we paid attention to the articles published in scientific databases. We often noticed that authors also mentioned transformational style of leadership in relation with the concept of autopoiesis (Drodge & Murphy 2002, pp. 420–438, Schieffer 2006, pp. 607–623, Weick, Tsoukas & Shepherd 2005, pp. 420–438, Gilstrap 2009, pp. 57–77). As already indicated in the Introduction, autopoiesis means self-renovation and self-development. Excellent leaders (we will name them autopoiesic leaders) can be only the leaders who constantly renew their knowledge and develop at the same time. When reviewing literature, we paid attention to the following three most frequent variables, to which we shall refer as three fundamental components that autopoiesic leaders must keep in mind in their leadership and, especially, development, namely:

- goal orientation (Aldao, Sheppes & Gross 2015, pp. 263–278, Dulewicz & Higgs 2005, pp. 105–123, Seppälä, Lipponen, Bardi & Pirttilä-Backman 2012, pp. 136–155, Choi 2007, pp. 467–484, Bettencourt (2004, pp. 165–180),
- emotional sensitivity (Geoghegan & Dulewicz, 2008, pp. 58–67, Cavallo & Brienza 2006, p. 1, Turner, Müller, & Dulewicz 2009, pp. 198–216, Müller & Turner 2007, pp. 21–32, Leban & Zulauf 2004, pp. 554–564), and
- flexibility (Zaccaro, Foti & Kenny 2004, p. 357, Van Den Berg & Van Der Velde (2005, pp. 111–129, Egri & Herman 2000, pp. 571–604, Rosete & Ciarrochi. 2005, pp. 388–399, Dulewicz & Higgs 2003, pp. 193–210).

Our research will be focused on a thorough review of articles in which authors referred to the above-mentioned variables.

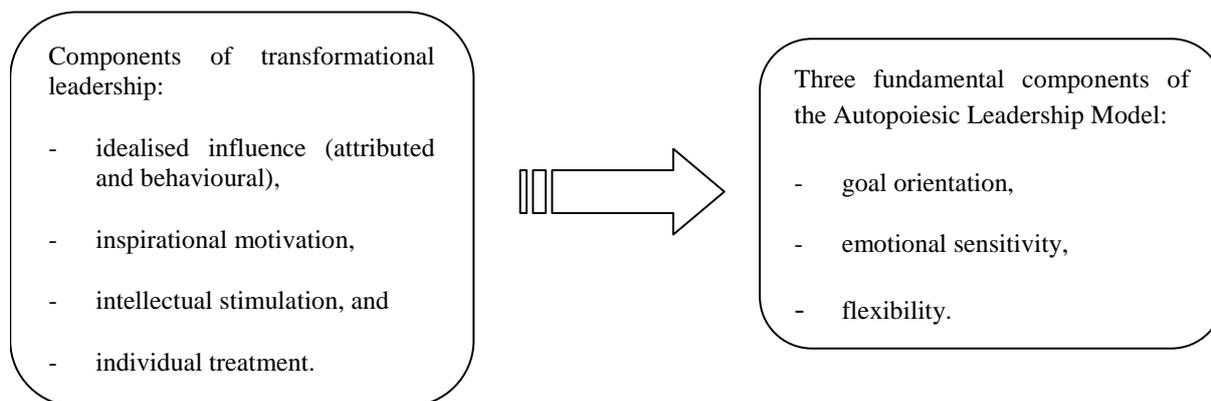
The review of the literature indicated three key variables of autopoiesic leadership, namely: goal orientation, emotional sensitivity and flexibility. They will be explained in more detail below.

### **3 Method**

In the first stage, data included the revision of published articles in the following scientific databases: Web of Science, ProQuest, Home-Springer, and Scopus. The key word was “autopoiesis”. Synonyms for this concept are also self-renovation and self-development. We related these two words with leadership or management.

In the second stage, when searching through scientific databases, we focused on the most frequent concepts we obtained in the first stage of the search. We determined three fundamental elements (goal orientation, emotional sensitivity and flexibility).

We prepared the model of autopoiesic leadership that includes three fundamental components. The model is shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Development of the Autopoiesic Leadership Model

Our research was based on the triangulation of theories. Within the research, we examined autopoiesic leadership and followed different, even opposite theoretical hypotheses.

## 4 Results

In the tabular form below are shown research results based on the review of literature in scientific databases.

The purpose of our research was to establish the incidence of key variables in organisations, and to find out potential differences or similarities significant for particular variables. The variable “goal orientation” is analysed in Table 1.

Table 1. Underlying variable: goal orientation (goal oriented)

<b>Author</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Aldao, Sheppes &amp; Gross (2015, pp. 263–278)</b>		Basic research, experimental psychopathology, and clinical practice	Emotional regulation variability, adaptation, goal orientation
<b>Dulewicz &amp; Higgs (2005, pp. 105–123)</b>	n=222	Quantitative research (LDQ questionnaire)	Involvement, engagement; (1) Competence areas: envision, engage, enable, inquire, develop; (2) Personal characteristics: authenticity, integrity, will, self-belief, self-awareness
<b>Seppälä, Lipponen, Bardi &amp; Pirttilä-Backman (2012, pp. 136–155)</b>	n=184	Correlation analysis, analysis of covariance three-way interaction	Values, identification, sense of power, change-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour
<b>Choi (2007, pp. 467–484)</b>	n=2040	Multivariate Hierarchical Linear Modelling	Strong vision, innovative climate, supportive leadership, psychological empowerment, felt responsibility for change, change-oriented
<b>Bettencourt (2004, pp. 165–180)</b>	n=286	Quantitative research (measurement model analyses)	Leader-member exchange quality, organisation commitment, learning goal orientation, performance goal orientation

The variable “emotional sensitivity” is analysed in Table 2.

Table 2. Underlying variable: emotional sensitivity

Author	Sample	Method	Result
<b>Geoghegan &amp; Dulewicz (2008, pp. 58–67)</b>	n=80	Factor analysis, t-test comparison, descriptive statistics	(1) IQ Dimensions: critical analysis, and judgement, vision and imagination, strategic perspective; (2) EQ Dimensions: self-awareness, emotional resilience, intuitiveness, sensitivity, influencing, motivation, conscientiousness; (3) MQ Dimensions: managing resources, engaging communication, empowering, developing, achieving
<b>Cavallo &amp; Brienza (2006, p. 1).</b>	n=183	Independent sample t-test, regression analysis	Highest performing managers have significantly more “emotional competence” than other managers.
<b>Turner, Müller, &amp; Dulewicz (2009, p. 198-216)</b>	n=414	Quantitative analysis	Critical analysis and judgement, vision and imagination, strategic perspective, engaging communication, managing resources, empowering, developing, achieving, self-awareness, emotional resilience, motivation, sensitivity, influence, intuitiveness, conscientiousness
<b>Müller &amp; Turner (2007, pp. 21–32).</b>	n=400	Quantitative multivariate techniques, multivariate regression analysis	(1) IQ Dimensions: strategic perspective, vision, critical thinking: (2) EQ Dimensions: motivation, conscientiousness, sensitivity, influence, self-awareness, emotional resilience; intuitiveness: (2) MQ Dimensions: managing resources, communication, developing, empowering, achieving
<b>Leban &amp; Zulauf (2004, pp. 554–564)</b>	n=24	Correlation analysis, Emotional Intelligence Ability Test (MSCEIT) and the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ) Form 5X	The test was employed to determine the relative emotional intelligence ability of project managers.

The third among underlying variables, i.e. “flexibility”, was analysed in Table 3.

Table 3. Underlying variable: flexibility

Author	Sample	Method	Result
Zaccaro, Foti & Kenny (2004, p. 357)	n=108	Correlation analysis	Persuasion, initiating structure, consideration, production emphasis
Van Den Berg & Van Der Velde (2005, pp. 111–129)	n=253	Factor analysis based on the seven functional flexibility items.	(1) To change jobs within the overall organisation, (2) to combine my job with other jobs, (3) to devote time and energy to education, (4) to work in different geographical locations, (5) be able to change to another job within the organisation, (6) be able to move to another function within my department, (7) be able to change to another job outside the organisation
Egri & Herman (2000, pp. 571–604).	n=73	Qualitative analysis, chi-square statistics, t-tests multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) and analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs)	Personality characteristics: need for achievement, need for affiliation, self-confidence, emotional maturity, need for power, perseverance, spiritual orientation, patience; Skills: interpersonal skills, technical skills, conceptual skills, political skills, time management skills
Rosete & Ciarrochi. (2005, pp. 388–399)	n=41	Quantitative analysis, correlation and regression analyses	Experiential EI, strategic EI, perceiving emotion, facilitating thought, understanding emotion, managing emotions
Dulewicz & Higgs (2003, pp. 193-210)	n=339	T-test	(1) EQ competencies: interpersonal sensitivity and emotional resilience; (2) IQ competencies; (3) MQ competencies

The results will be discussed in more detail below.

## 5 Discussion

Our research was based on a detailed review of literature about three underlying variables, namely: goal orientation, emotional sensitivity, and managers' flexibility in organisations. The research question refers to the frequency of these variables and possibility of their synergy with variables significant for transformational leadership that has been considered as one of the most important leadership styles so far.

While conducting our research, we often noticed the incidence of the concept of transformational leadership in relation to searched concepts. We conclude that this leadership style is increasingly present as the leadership style of excellent leaders. It mostly relies on the use of soft competencies that enable leaders the most efficient cooperation with co-workers. Transformational leadership is being studied through five dimensions, namely: two forms of idealised influence (attributed and behavioural), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulations, and individual treatment (Bass, 1997, p. 130). All five dimensions are also associated with goal orientation, emotional sensitivity, and managers' flexibility.

While reviewing articles with the key phrase "goal orientation", we also noticed other different variables mentioned by authors in their articles. These are predominantly soft variables, and the most important ones are somewhat different for each author. Aldao, Sheppes and Gross mention emotional sensitivity and adaptation (2015, pp. 263–278); for Dulewicz and Higgs (2005, pp. 105–123) the most important are participation and cooperation; Seppälä, Lipponen, Bardi and Pirttilä-Backman (2012, pp. 136–155), in their article, emphasised values, identification, sensation of power, guided organisational behaviour and affiliation. Besides goal orientation, Choi (2007, pp. 467–484) emphasised strong vision, innovative climate, supportive leadership, psychological empowerment, and the feeling of responsibility for changes. Yet, Bettencourt (2004, pp. 165–180) concluded in his research that important variables are quality and affiliation to organisation.

In the next step, when we related the phrase "emotional sensitivity" with the leadership, we obtained results that were significantly more similar among individual authors. Geoghegan and Dulewicz (2008, pp. 58–67) wrote about three indispensable competencies of every leader, i.e. intellectual, emotional and leadership competencies. Müller and Turner (2007, pp. 21–32) as well described such a research result in their article. Cavallo and Brienza (2006, p. 1), in their article, concluded that top managers have a significantly higher level of emotional intelligence than their co-workers on lower job positions. Leban and Zulauf (2004, pp. 554–564) also concluded similarly. They argue that successful project managers are more emotionally intelligent compared to their less successful co-workers. Turner, Müller, & Dulewicz (2009, pp. 198–216), in their paper, did not classify indispensable competencies in groups, but they only listed them: critical analysis and assessment, vision and mission, strategic aspect, cooperation involving communication, management of resources, development, self-awareness, emotional stability, motivation, sensitivity, influence, intuitiveness and conscientiousness.

The aim of the third part of our central survey was to research the theory about managers' flexibility. In their studies, the authors very often use, flexibility in relation to leadership, but they associate it quite differently with other variables. In their study, Zaccaro, Foti and Kenny (2004, p. 357) indicate a convincing, initiative-based structure, deliberation, and emphasis on production as important flexibility-related variables. In their research, Van Den Berg and Van Der Velde (2005, pp. 111–129) associate flexibility with the ability of an employee to change job positions, either within a department or within an organisation, but also out of the

organisation, including the ability of additional education and the ability to train employees. Egri and Herman (2000, pp. 571–604) consider that flexibility is especially indispensable as a personality trait of employees (the need for achievements and affiliation, self-confidence, emotional maturity, the need for power, persistence, spiritual orientation, and patience), as well as a skill (interpersonal skills, technical knowledge, conceptual abilities, political skills, and the ability to use time). In their research, Rosete & Ciarrochi (2005, pp. 388–399) indicate the importance of empirical emotional intelligence and strategic emotional intelligence, as well as detection, relief, understanding, and control of one's emotions. Yet, Dulewicz and Higgs (2003, pp. 193–210), in their study, predominantly wrote about the flexibility of emotional, intellectual and leadership competencies.

In our description of results, we have already listed differences and similarities among individual authors. Indeed, some authors in their studies indicated additional sub-variables that can be significant for leaders' excellence. However, we can consider goal orientation, emotional sensitivity and flexibility as underlying variables. In this way, we confirm our research question, in which we assumed the possibility of synergy among these variables and variables that are significant for transformational leadership. Therefore, we opened a new possibility of systematic research of leaders, named autopoiesic leaders.

## **6 Conclusion**

In the research, we have triangulated theories; we upgraded the excellence of transformational leader with the possibility of introduction of new variables that can produce a synergic effect with the existing ones. We added three variables, i.e. goal orientation, emotional sensitivity, and flexibility, to the two forms of idealised influence (attributed and behavioural), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual treatment. We consider that we could have added five additional accompanying variables to our model. That would increase leaders' excellence even more. These are leadership with questions, mediating communication, acceptance of feedback, empowerment, and continual learning. In this way we could get the model of autopoiesic leader who, in the future, would be able “to take care about themselves” in the first place, which also means they would be able to “take care about their employees”. Here, we refer mostly to the efficiency of all internal resources of employees, which is today quite often untapped potential.

The scientific contribution of this article is the preparation of the most recent review of conclusions about important managers' excellence variables, the presentation of the triangulation of theories about factors that influence leadership excellence, and the creation of the new model of autopoiesic leader. That model is exactly as described in this paper; it is presented in an appropriate, holistic way, and from the point of view that was not applied by anyone so far. In the worldwide scientific literature, this field has not been researched yet.

Research results should influence the decisions of enterprise owners and top managers about the introduction of such leadership models into their enterprises. According to the results, different authors frequently provided identical conclusions about the importance of particular

variables. Furthermore, this research now offers another model that could be even more efficient in the future when it comes to excellence in an informed environment, in which intuitiveness and the self are of utmost importance. The organisations of the future are autopoiesic organisations that take care about self-development and self-renovation, and employ autopoiesic leaders who are able to take care about their self-development and their self-renovation in the first place. Consequently, all this has a positive impact on the effectiveness of an organisation, the entire society, and the environment.

Predominantly, the research limitation can be that only a triangulation of theories has been done. There is also room for improvement; research about this topic can be conducted in several ways, such as combining different research approaches, methods, techniques, scientific disciplines, data sources, and by including more researchers. Additional limitations of the research include impossibilities of comparison as the model was new, and there had been no studies conducted on this topic. A growing demand by owners calls for a quick development of science and even faster implementation of new knowledge in the environment in which it can be applicable. This is a big challenge for all of us – there is, practically, no other possibility than to accept it.

We will suggest more surveys to be conducted in the future; they could improve the model and follow the enterprises' missions and visions more efficiently in environments of the future; we name these environments informed environments.

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### **Povzetek:**

#### **Tri temeljne spremenljivke avtopoietskega vodenja**

**Raziskovalno vprašanje (RV):** Kakšen stil vodenja bi lahko bil nadgradnja transformacijskega vodenja?

**Namen:** Namen raziskave je bil ustvariti nov stil vodenja, katerega spremenljivke bi bile nadgradnja spremenljivk transformacijskega vodenja. Slednji je namreč prepoznan kot uspešen stil vodenja v uspešnih organizacijah.

**Metoda:** Triangulaciji teorij je bila metoda, po kateri smo raziskovali objavljene članke v znanstvenih bazah. Za razjasnitev raziskovalnega vprašanja smo proučevali različne avtorje, ki so v svojih raziskavah izhajali iz različnih teoretičnih predpostavk. Le-te so si bile v nekaj člankih tudi v nasprotju.

**Rezultati:** V raziskavi smo ugotovili, da so avtorji pogosto omenjali določene spremenljivke, ko so raziskovali na temo transformacijskega vodenja. Mi smo te spremenljivke med seboj povezali in sestavili nov model, ki smo ga poimenovali avtopoietsko vodenje. Glavne spremenljivke le-tega so (1) ciljna usmerjenost, (2) čustvena občutljivost in (3) prožnost vodij v organizacijah.

**Organizacija:** Naša raziskava bi lahko pozitivno vplivala na menedžerje v smislu prepoznavanja pomembnosti izbranih spremenljivk. Uporaba modela avtopoietskega vodenja v praksi bi podjetju prinesla večjo učinkovitost v poslovnem procesu, s tem pa povečala njegovo finančno uspešnost.

**Družba:** Avtopoietsko vodenje je način vodenja, ki v največji možni meri vpliva na izrabo notranjih virov posameznika. Na tak način ta postane notranje motiviran, kar je temelj kvalitetnega dela. S tem se krepi socialen vidik zaposlenih, ki posledično pozitivno vpliva tudi na življenje izven organizacijskega sistema, torej na njegovo družino in širše življenjsko okolje.

**Originalnost:** V svetovni literaturi smo pojem avtopoieza zasledili med raziskovalci na področju menedžmenta, ni bil pa še narejen modela avtopoietskega vodenja.

**Omejitve/nadaljnje raziskovanje:** Naša raziskava je temeljila na triangulaciji teorij, ki se je omejila na tri ključne spremenljivke. To bi lahko razumeli tudi kot omejitev raziskave. V prihodnje bomo z raziskovanjem nadaljevali, s čimer bomo skušali model avtopoietskega vodenja dopolniti oziroma nadgraditi.

**Ključne besede:** transformacijsko vodenje, avtopoietsko vodenje, ciljna usmerjenost, čustvena občutljivost, prožnost.

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